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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000452

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SUBJECT: TONGA FOREIGN SECRETARY TONE REITERATES TIE OF
IRAQ DEPLOYMENT TO VISA ISSUE

REF: SUVA 435 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

1. (C) Tonga's Foreign Secretary on Sept. 13 reiterated his government's threat (reftel) that an absence of USG progress to bring visa services on the ground in Tonga may affect bilateral relations in general, including the willingness of Tonga to commit troops to a follow-on deployment to MNFI in Iraq. We hope Washington can find a way to demonstrate significant movement ASAP on a solution that gives Embassy Suva the resources (technological, human, budgetary) to provide periodic on-the-ground visa services to Tonga in a meaningful way. End summary.

Tonga reiterates visa-Iraq deployment threat

2. (SBU) As foreshadowed reftel, Foreign Secretary Va'inga Tone traveled to Suva to reinforce the Tonga Government's dipnote of last week on visa services and the potential impact on Tonga-U.S. relations. Tone and the Ambassador discussed the issues over lunch on Sept. 13. Tone reiterated the view of his government that Tonga has stepped up voluntarily to contribute to the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq (a Tonga Defense Service (TDS) six-month deployment into Iraq is to take place momentarily, with another six-month deployment scheduled to follow); and as a "quid pro quo" the technologically proficient, wealthy USG superpower surely can find a way to provide visa services on the ground in Tonga. (Currently Tongans must travel to Suva (a US\$513 air trip, plus expenses) for visa adjudication.)

3. (SBU) In the conversation, Tone twice confirmed the language of the dipnote that, absent progress on the visa issue, "the Tonga Government will not be disposed to assisting the United States in the military or other fields." Tone made clear that language is intended to apply to the follow-on deployment to Iraq, as well as to relations more broadly. He said the Tonga Defense Board approved the language a couple of weeks ago, with the King present and assenting.

Seeking on-the-ground visa services ASAP

4. (SBU) Tone pushed again for either actual adjudication of visas in Tonga, at least on a regular if not a constant basis, or, as a fall-back proposition, some sort of pre-screening of potential visa applicants in Tonga so that

those who clearly would not merit a visa would not have to pay the high cost of a trip to Suva. The Ambassador reviewed yet again U.S. policy, as Embassy Suva understands it, against pre-screening of visa applications. He noted the current requirement that the visa interview and electronic fingerprinting must take place at the same time, with the fingerprint technology currently confined to an embassy or consulate. The Ambassador noted yet again that efforts are under way to make the technology portable for some uses; but he emphasized that no solution is yet available, nor is it clear whether or when any future technology would be authorized and deployed to Embassy Suva. The Ambassador did review past discussions of the issue with CA in Washington, including a brief opportunity Tonga PM Sevele had to discuss the topic with a senior CA official last May. The Ambassador noted, as a practical matter, that any future visa-adjudication process in Tonga would likely see a rise in the already-high rejection rate as some who currently cannot afford a trip to Suva would roll the dice at home.

Resource issues involved

15. (SBU) The Ambassador observed that resource issues could well arise with any potential portable-visa solution: arranging a secure environment; figuring out any staffing and budget needs; determining where funding would come from to cover such costs; possibly adding a surcharge to the normal visa-application fee; etc. Tone suggested that Tonga would understand imposition of a reasonable surcharge for portable visa services, assuming such a surcharge would be significantly less than the current cost for a Tongan's trip to Suva. (While not discussed, presumably the Tonga Government might also accept having Tongans pay the usual

SUVA 00000452 002 OF 002

visa-application fee up front if a pre-screening process could be arranged.) The Tonga Government simply is determined to relieve an irritation in the public that has been festering for at least ten years.

Comment

16. (C) We reiterate reftel comment. We understand Tongan frustration about the visa issue. It will inevitably continue to affect bilateral relations unless the U.S. can find the means to provide some sort of meaningful visa-adjudication or visa-screening services in Tonga. Tonga is playing the Iraq card figuring that will bring increased attention in Washington to finding a solution. It is possible that TDS Commander Uta'atu can convince the King who can convince the Prime Minister not to cancel the follow-on Iraq deployment in six months. It is also possible that, as Tone reported, the King has accepted the PM's argument: if no movement on a visa solution, no follow-on deployment. Embassy Suva's preferred course is for Washington to show significant movement ASAP on some sort of solution that gives us the resources to provide on-the-ground visa services in a meaningful way. We emphasize that, depending on the solution, "resources" could need to include additional staff and/or budget, in addition to any necessary technology.

DINGER